A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 51

Breathe in. Breathe out. The basic principles of entering meditation that Obi-wan had followed for nearly four decades now. The dark side surrounded everything, an omnipresent, turbulent murkiness, just out of reach, walling him in. His own inner balance warded it off, but he couldn't forget it was out there.

Time could slip away while in meditation. Some masters could go for days, coming out of their trance only when thirst could no longer be ignored. Obi-wan wasn't sure for how long he'd been meditating when *it* happened.

Something tore through the Force, bubbling with malice, gathering all the darkness to it like iron filings to a magnet. For a brief moment, the shroud of the dark side fell away, and Obi-wan was filled with an incredible sense of danger. The fate of the Jedi balanced on the edge of a knife. He could almost *see* the peril-

And then it closed in again. The evil presence withdrew, growing fainter and fainter. Obi-wan came out of his meditative state, and looked to where he'd felt it going. He didn't need a window to know he was facing the Senatorial District.

What in the blazes was that?

He got in touch with the Temple's security. "Master Drallig, I need the flight paths of every vehicle that just came near the Temple," he said into his commlink.

"Already got them," Cin Drallig said.

"What?"

"You felt it too, Master Kenobi?"

"…Yes, yes, I did."

"None of them are suspect, but for one: a *Theta*-class shuttle, registered to the office of the Supreme Chancellor."

Obi-wan felt a knot in his stomach. "I don't care what the others are doing, the Council needs to meet, *now.*"

"*Well done, General Potkin, well done,*" Chancellor Tarkin's hologram said, hands clasped but no smile on his face. "*However. I do not see Komara's name on the list of dead. You were given explicit instructions to kill her.*"

"Komara is of little consequence, my lord. I had her handily beat until she called in that ship of hers," Potkin said. She stood at attention, shoulder squared, hands behind her back, doing her best to ignore the bacta patches on the burns and cuts the collapse of the spaceport had inflicted upon her. "Mandalore is ours. Saxon will rule on behalf of the Republic. All opposing factions have been crushed or made irrelevant. I have delivered victory to the Republic, Chancellor."

"*The rebels turned the beskar mines into a lake of fire, General,*" Tarkin said. "*Mandalore is useless to us without the beskar mines. This is as fruitless a victory as they come. You didn't kill the traitor and you didn't protect the mines. It'll be a year at least until that mess cools off.*"

"Captain Danigan didn't-"

"*Do not try to push this onto your subordinates, General.*" Tarkin pointed an accusing finger at her. "*This failure is yours. Perhaps I should have sent Aspar after all.*"

Potkin grit her teeth until they hurt, her knuckles went white as she clenched her fists. "What would you have me do, my lord?" Her words came out as more of a growl than a question.

"*The rebels destroyed our beskar mines. Go destroy something of theirs in turn. That's a simple enough task that even you should be able to achieve.*" Potkin opened her mouth, but Tarkin waved her away. "*Go, attend your mission, General. I'll hear no more from you until it's done.*"

The transmission cut out, leaving Potkin to seethe in an otherwise empty communications room.

She stormed out of the room, communicator in hand already. "Captain Danigan! We are leaving orbit in fifteen minutes!"

"*Where to, General?*" Danigan asked.

"Wherever that tracking beacon on Komara's ship will lead us."

"What's the situation?" Esera asked, coming up through the two-deck lift. She'd just finished applying bacta patches to her injuries, and she'd checked on Purity and Murshida; one had deactivated herself due to a damaged biochemical powerplant, the other was still unconscious as his body was ravaged by an overwhelming drug cocktail his own armor had concocted. The Skakoan's lifesigns were weak, but had recently stabilized. There was little Esera could do to help him, either way.

"Scanners are quiet," Sellero said. "One hell of a ship you've got, Komara. Jammers, spoofers, blinders, I expected all that, but a cloaking device? How much did this cost you?"

A small scar straight up my chest, Esera thought. "Enough," she told the princess. "Has she been behaving?"

"Uh, yeah, I think. Rear port landing gear keeps flagging as damaged, bumping around inside a spaceport might have done it," Sellero said. The pirate woman wasn't entirely aware yet that *Whirlwind* had a will of her own. Esera could feel the ship was disturbed at having someone else at the controls. But perhaps *Whirlwind* could feel her passengers' emotions too. Perhaps *Whirlwind* was behaving because she too could feel the barely held-back storm of grief and rage building up in Samé Sellero. Having something important to do was all that was keeping the princess together right now.

Rahab of Tenau was taking her losses differently. The usually-boisterous girl was quiet and subdued, constantly staring into space. She hid her tears behind her helmet, but Mandalorian armor couldn't hide those slumped shoulders and weary posture.

"How much longer until we find this ship of yours? If it even still exists?" Sellero's tone was dark, and her smile had no humor.

"It exists!"

"For all we know, your *Encounter* blew itself to smithereens in hyperspace. That old bucket didn't have much life left in it, even before your boy-toys decided to go head-on with a star destroyer!"

Boy-toys? Oh, Voyan and Meo. Esera couldn't muster the energy to blush, when she realized what Sellero was getting at. She was too tired, too hurt, and too stressed to feel embarrassed by all the stupid visions her youthful hormones put into her head. "*Encounter* is alright. I can feel it."

"Whatever, Jedi," grumbled Sellero. "And you are a Jedi, right?"

"Not for a long time now," said Esera.

"So… like some kind of Sith?"

"*No*." Esera glared at her.

Whirlwind interrupted with a chime: the hyperdrive was ready again. "Okay, let's check the next fallback point, maybe this time we'll be lucky…" Sellero didn't sound like she thought they would be.

The stars streaked around them, and the blue vortex of hyperspace swallowed *Whirlwind*.

Encounter shook again, rocked by yet another secondary explosion as hypermatter fuel ignited, only a few dozen meters away. Sanya was thrown against the ice-cold bulkhead, still chilled despite being repressurized for two hours.

"Careful, kid," Oska Oto said, yanking her back upright. "Commander, Oto here."

"*I read you, Oto,*" Voyan's voice said over the intercom.

"Sanya and I manually dumped the last starboard fuel tank. There'll be nothing left to burn now."

"*Great work, lieutenant. You too, Sanya.*" There was a pause. "*Yeah, that did it. Temperatures are decreasing over there already. Get to the mess, Alize's got something to drink there.*"

"Got it, sir." Oto saluted, wearily, at the intercom speaker. In the passage, the red-blinking lights suddenly turned to yellow. They'd finally stood down from general quarters.

Fuel wasn't all they'd lost to the star destroyer. The water mains were gone. No drinking water, no hydroponics water, no water to even wash in. Sanya was grateful the ship's sanitary plumbing worked on vacuum power, at least. Until they could get to a dockyard, *Encounter* had been reduced to a downgrade of the average Agricorps camp.

Alize was hard at work in the mess, combining what water was left with the incredible stash of alcohol that had made it aboard over the past few months. Some was Oto's, some was Durm's, some was Voyan's, some was Alize's herself. Incredibly, some was even from Esera's cabin. *I never imagined,* Sanya thought. Should such a troubled girl have access to a depressant drug, culturally accepted as it was? She wasn't sure.

"I've watered down this Neimoidian ale as much as I could," said Alize, pouring them both glasses. She looked only at Sanya when speaking. "It goes down easy and was low in alcohol content anyway. Miha doesn't want you lightweights getting drunk on the job."

"How much longer are we going to be out here?" Sanya asked.

"The hyperwave sensors got melted," Oto said. "We can't see, we can't hear, we can't even shout into the dark. Our EM-spectrum backups are limited to the speed of light, so if the enemy's around, we're toast."

"Toasted bread, there's an idea for dinner," muttered Alize, scratching a claw behind her ear. "Toasted bread and norberry jam. Jam's got water in it, right?"

"Sure," said Oto, staring blankly. As close to death as they'd all come, Cathar and Zygerrian were not comfortable around each other.

Sanya steered Oto back to the topic at hand: "So we're just waiting around until Esera finds us? We've got the hyperdrive, why can't we jump away?"

"Because we'd be jumping blind," said Oto. "Who knows where we'd end up? This ship's already had a brush with one singularity, and that's one more than a starship should ever run up against. Until *Whirlwind* gets here, we're staying put. That's the advice I gave the commander. And then there's the fact we've lost half our fuel, a quarter of our oxygen, and two thirds of our water…"

"We can just get water from a comet nearby, right?" Sanya asked.

"Get out a telescope and start looking for one, then," said Oto. "Then feel free to process it… on the hangar deck, I suppose."

"We can't process comets for water?" Sanya was dumbfounded. "Every Republic cruiser can do that."

"This ship was meant to be run by a crew of a dozen organics and a hundred droids," Oto said. "Why do you think you have your own cabin?"

Sanya frowned, but it made sense to her. She'd never gotten her own cabin while hitching rides on *Acclamators* and *Venators*. They'd been packed in those ships like a can of Dac sardines.

For another six hours, *Encounter* sat blind and deaf, orbiting an obscure red dwarf star only visited by smugglers and pirates on occasion. Apparently Buna had tipped off Shau about it, and Shau had chosen this place to flee to. Mandalore was only twenty light years away, but it was the last place anyone would look for them.

They had no warning of *Whirlwind*'s approach until the ship was practically entering the hangar. Sanya rushed there, and arrived just as Voyan did.

"Don't you have something to do?" he asked her.

"I'm tired of being a mechanic," Sanya said.

"Just don't make her mad, alright?"

"Fine."

Whirlwind had already touched down, and the ramp had dropped. Out came Esera, in the remains of the same uniform she'd departed in what felt like days ago, but had really only been less than twenty-four hours. Her jacket was gone, her skirt tattered, her sweater covered in soot and dust and blood. Someone or something had given her a black eye. She looked awful, and her presence in the Force prickled like a thornbush.

"Miha Voyan!" she barked. "What have you done to my ship!?"

Voyan stood at attention and saluted. "Captain Komara, we have sustained damage in our prior engagement-"

Esera bristled, and shook a finger up at him. "Don't give me that crap! What were you thinking, taking on a *Tector*? Are you insane?"

"I am perfectly sane, Captain," said Voyan, as cool as ever. "If *Encounter* had not remained on station, then who could have executed your Base Delta Zero order?"

"*Base Delta Zero?*" Sanya stared at them both, agape. "Did I hear that right? You ordered a *Base Delta Zero*, Esera? Are *you* insane?"

Under attack from two angles, Esera's fury began to deflate, and be replaced by shame. Or what Sanya hoped was shame. "That was a very foolish thing to do, commander," she said.

"No matter what happened on the surface, this was a strategic victory for the Confederacy. We executed our mission under acceptable parameters: the Republic no longer has access to beskar ore," said Voyan. "This was not a loss, Captain."

"Not a loss, huh? Weeks of effort, millions of credits, hundreds of lives, all gone up in flames, and it's not a loss?" The bitterness in Esera's voice could have spoilt one of Alize's dinners.

"Maybe because you ordered the orbital bombardment of a planet?" Sanya suggested, hands on her hips. "Don't ignore me, I won't let you. You told me you left the Republic for this kind of thing!"

"It was just the beskar mines," Esera said. She refused to look Sanya in the eyes. "It had to be done."

"Is that you speaking, or Grievous?"

"Shut up, Sanya."

"Well, at least you're using my name again!"

As they debated, the ship's droids were helping the wounded out of *Whirlwind*. Murshida came out in a heavy duty stretcher, missing his entire left arm, right up to the shoulder. Then came Purity, looking peacefully asleep, but riddled with scorch marks. The magnaguards were next, one headless carrying the upper half of the other, and last out were Rahab and Sellero, just as weary and filthy as Esera.

"Looks fine to me…" Sellero muttered, glancing over at one of the landing gear. Her hat was gone and her impractical if appealing uniform was on the verge of becoming indecent. "Please tell me that Zygerrian cook is alive, I need food that's not ration packs."

"Alize is just fine, princess," said Voyan.

Rahab, helmet under her arm, had a hard look in her downcast eyes. "Captain Komara, now that we're safe, I need to contact my people," she said. Esera looked over to Voyan, who shook his head.

"Comms are fried," he said.

"You can use *Whirlwind*," Esera told her. Rahab nodded, and went back in.

"What happened down there?" Sanya asked.

"Someone on Sellero's crew betrayed us," said Esera.

"They must have gotten into the computer on my ship just before we sent the droids down," Sellero said. "It's the only way those things could have been made to turn on us."

That wasn't what Sanya had really meant. She tried a direct approach: "Will Murshida and Purity be okay?"

"I don't know," Esera said. She brought a hand to her temple, and closed her eyes. "I really don't know. I hope so, but what good is hoping when everything keeps going wrong? I-"

"Captain Komara?" called Rahab, from *Whirlwind*.

"*What?*" asked Esera, either unable or unwilling to keep her frustration out of her voice.

"*Whirlwind* isn't behaving anymore," Rahab said. "Scanners are going crazy."

"Hold on…"

Esera wasn't even inside the ship for fifteen seconds before she came bounding out. "They found us!"

"Who did?" Sellero asked.

"Potkin's *Tector!*"

Sanya's blood went cold. "No, no, no, it's not fair! We've spent thirteen hours trying to get this piece of junk to stop falling apart!"

"General quarters!" Voyan yelled, and the yellow blinking lights snapped back to red. The dreaded alarm blared out across the ship, calling all hands to their action stations. "Captain, our sensor suite is *gone*," he said to Esera.

"How gone?"

"EM spectrum only. We might as well be blind past a light-minute."

"A light-minute is all I'll need. I'm taking *Whirlwind* back out, I'll be your eyes and ears. You get to the bridge!"

Voyan nodded, and grabbed Sanya by the arm. "Back to your cabin, Sanya, take Alize!"

"Please don't try to fight them this time!" Sanya whined.

"I'm not even dreaming of it."

"They've taken tremendous damage, General," Captain Danigan said. He stroked his pencil-thin mustache, smugly self-assured. "They won't last long against our firepower."

"Yet somehow they remain operational," said Potkin. *Daring*'s captain was a pompous, arrogant man. She didn't like him, but he had a third quality: competence. Potkin did not like Danigan, but he did his job and did it well. Usually.

"This is the most resilient *Recusant* I've ever faced," Danigan told her. "Lieutenant, what did the scanners find at Mandalore, again?"

"Chronometric particles, sir," said an officer on the scanners.

Potkin crossed her arms, and stared at the Separatist ship fleeing before them on the viewscreen. "Chronometric particles… What the hell have you been up to, Komara? Playing with your hyperdrive's relativistic shielding?"

"It's a damned strange ship, General. I look forward to adding her destruction to my record." Danigan puffed up his chest, captain's rank badge gleaming.

"Then *finish* it," Potkin said.

Whoever was the chief engineer on *Encounter*, Potkin had to hand it to them: they were doing one hell of a job of keeping their ship operational. Their hyperdrive was charging up already, despite an apparent lack of sensors.

Intelligence said Scimitar *had a cloaking device. Maybe* Scimitar *is guiding them away?* The tracking beacon inside the landing gear well was still active. It had weeks of battery left. And if *Scimitar* was out, that meant the beacon couldn't be removed easily.

Encounter jumped into hyperspace after taking only a few turbolaser volleys. Sooner or later, they'd pass within range of a hyperwave relay station and the beacon would ping it.

Three minutes later, *Daring* received the first ping. They were headed to the Galactic north, where Separatist fortress worlds lay but a few thousand light years distant. A lot could happen over a few thousand light years, though, especially when the hyperspace routes were this rough.

Far below Republica 500, where the Jedi would never find it, the Rakatan Seed lay on a workbench. Only four men in the Galaxy knew it existed. The Red Guards who'd witnessed everything had been subjected to some of Palpatine's mind-wiping technology aboard the shuttle. As far as they were concerned, they'd slept through the whole thing. Right now they were punishing themselves in their barracks' gym, doing the harshest physical training possible to make up for such a shameful breach of duty. If it made them stronger, there was no harm done.

"Such a curious thing. That so much power could come from something so small…" Janus Greejatus reached out to touch the Seed, and then thought better of it. "What kind of flower will it grow into? Surely, it *must* be powerful."

"Exceedingly powerful," said Aspar. "Overlord Theenilar would never risk it falling into the hands of the impure."

The casual mention of this long-dead Rakatan overlord caught no one off-guard. This was what Aspar did now. They'd had the whole voyage home to get used to it.

"Well, the impure have it in their hands," Maul said, looking giddy. "And his holocron, too!"

"Have you made progress on it?" asked Tarkin.

Maul shook his head. "My lord, we've only been back for a day. We've gotten the hidden operating system running. The best I can tell you is that there is a Rakatan-to-Sith gloss in here."

"Which means you now have to translate a language you don't know into a language you barely know," said Greejatus. "An unenviable task. Aspar can't help, with his stolen memories?"

"Rakatans do not think in words." Aspar peered down at the Seed, eyes flashing beneath his mask. "I can somewhat make sense of their writing system, I even recognize some of the words. But this is hardly a foundation we can use."

"It matters not. We have the gloss, we have an understanding of Sith. All we need is time," Maul said.

And time he would have.

Tarkin spent the rest of his day making sure the Galaxy hadn't fallen to a new rebel onslaught, or the craven Senate. His several days of absence had generated a huge amount of news, almost all of it hilariously off-mark. What would those parasitical journalists say if they knew a trashy tabloid was the closest to the truth? Tarkin *had* been in search of a war-winning weapon. Just not from a mysterious benefactor in the Unknown Regions.

Suitably assured no one had ruined anything while he was away, Tarkin moved onto more interesting matters. He paid a visit to the Republic Special Weapons Group, the Coruscant-based wing of the Ultimate Weapon's development. There, one Professor Sahali was slaving away on the theoretical side of the engineering challenge, while his counterpart Bevel Lemelisk oversaw the practical application at the construction site. When Tarkin had been elected, the fools were still building the thing in orbit of Geonosis. *They stretched the supply lines almost as far as they could be stretched!* No wonder Krennic thought the project was going to take almost two decades to complete. The Republic's hold on the Corellian run was tenuous at best, and almost non-existent past Allanteen until the start of the prior year.

One of Tarkin's first orders had been to move the weapon much closer to its supply sources. In fact, it was now in orbit of its primary supply source: the shattered planet of Humbarine. Those few Humbariners who had survived the cataclysm had eagerly volunteered their services to avenge their destroyed world; they were heavily augmented by less-willing labor acquired recently. Little did Grievous know that his wounding of the planet had exposed its mineral-rich mantle for no cost to the Republic. Almost all the raw materials the Ultimate Weapon needed could be mined a scant few hundred kilometers below it. Refined materials, from advanced alloys to computer software, still had to be brought in from outside.

He may be a rustic oaf, but Krennic knows how to play the hand he's dealt, thought Tarkin. Under Krennic's authority, millions of rebels had been deported from highly-developed worlds on the outer Corellian Run. He'd sorted through them for their most-able specialists and workers, and quietly disposed of the rest in the mines that delved Humbarine's exposed depths. The justification was a law sponsored by one of Palpatine's allies in the Senate, which had quietly passed as part of a larger bill: the Relocation and Resettlement Act. Simply put, Republic officials could deport up to an entire planet's worth of people and put them wherever they wanted. Tarkin had considered useful applications of it, but Krennic had beaten him to the punch. Countless Trade Federation and Techno Union-educated engineers, machinists, mathematicians, and designers from Druckenwell and Nexus Ortai now worked on the instrument of their rebellion's doom.

Assuming, of course, that the Seed actually did anything. Tarkin remembered the creeping darkness of that dead planet, and had a feeling it *did*.

All alone on *Whirlwind,* Esera wondered if she risked trying to wash herself with the sink on the lower deck. Seeing Voyan's rumpled but clean uniform had alerted her to just how filthy she'd become. Dirt and grim and blood seemed to cake her skin, trapping heat within her and adding sweat to the horrid mix. Everything she touched felt sticky, but it was just her disgusting hands.

No, I need to stay here, she decided. *Whirlwind* could take care of herself, but she needed to take care of *Encounter*. An emergency comms laser was the only link between her and the destroyer following in her metaphorical footprints.

"*New Bornalex, Captain?*" Shau Meo's hollow and distorted voice said over comms. "*I've got three ways we could get there, but it's going to be at least two hours and at most thirty-four.*"

"I want the shortest one, ensign."

"*It'll take us into Republic territory.*"

"So be it."

"*It's two jumps to the Phindar system from here. We'll need to get around a nebula and-*"

"You worry about the details, I'll worry about getting you there," Esera said.

"*Um, yes, Captain.*"

She could almost see the Felinian boy's ears dipping down.

Phindar was a Loyalist system, the only system of note between Gala and New Bornalex. It'd repulsed all offensives aimed at it, and it remained the roadblock on the Salin Corridor, denying the Confederacy a quick route between Serenno and Raxus. Until Esera had taken Zygerria and the Corporate Sector, at least. With its importance reduced, Phindar's garrison surely had been reduced too, right? She could only hope so. Reconnaissance on this now-tertiary front had become infrequent in the last six months.

Whatever the situation, they'd have to get past Phindar to get to New Bornalex, the nearest Separatist fortress with enough firepower to repel a *Tector*. Beyond New Bornalex was Botajef, a hotly contested no-man's-system where the war had continued on as usual, despite the quiet in most other parts of the Galaxy.

And she did expect the *Tector* to follow. Aspar had gotten a tracking beacon on *Whirlwind* before she'd been *Whirlwind*. It only followed that Potkin somehow had gotten a beacon onto one of the two ships. That they hadn't arrived in that star system until Esera had been there for a few minutes indicated *Whirlwind* was the one being tracked. The left landing gear bay kept flashing on the damage control panel. Sellero had even said as much, Esera had just failed to realize the implications in time.

She sighed. "Sanya's right, this isn't fair," she said to *Whirlwind*. "It's just one thing after another. Every time I think we're safe, I get proven wrong."

Whirlwind's engines hummed.

"I'm going to need to call for help. I can't do a spacewalk in hyperspace. I've never even been out in space, outside of a ship, I mean. You tried to tell me, *Whirlwind*, but I didn't hear you."

The hyperwave receiver came alive with static for a moment.

"I'm sorry. I should have been more aware. I should have listened to you. Ironic, isn't it? No one ever listens to me, but you've got even less of a voice than I do, and I ignored you. You think the Force is trying to tell me something?"

Somewhere in the hull, machinery whirred.

"Maybe I should spend more time with my machines. R8, you, *Encounter*, if she survives this… Purity, too. Poor Purity. She's innocent. She didn't deserve the fate of getting stuck with the likes of us. So young, and already scarred by this stupid war. I think I've been looking in mirrors too often, lately."

Shau Meo's voice broke in: "*Uh, Captain, we can hear you…*" The comms laser had been active this entire time, transmitting her entire conversation with *Whirlwind* back to *Encounter*'s bridge.

Esera was still too tired to feel embarrassed. "There's a very real chance we'll all be dead by the end of today, ensign. Do you have any thoughts you'd like to voice?"

"*Captain! Don't say that!*"

"*I don't regret staying in orbit, Captain,*" Voyan said. "*If the Republic got ahold of beskar steel, we'd all be in deep trouble.*"

"*If we're dead either way, what does it matter!?*" The Felinian boy sounded near hysterical.

"*There are bigger things in this Galaxy than us, Shau,*" said Voyan. "*If we die so others can live free, well, that's a better end than I'd have gotten back home*."

"*But I like being alive!*"

"*Shouldn't have taken off those ribbons,*" Voyan said. Esera could imagine his composed expression, barely betrayed by the slightest hint of cold humor. She could imagine Meo's fallen ears and wide eyes. She could imagine Alize howling up a racket at the damage Esera had done to her kitchenware this time. She could imagine Durm and Oto at work keeping the ship together, she could imagine Buna's sardonic remarks as everything went to hell around her. She could imagine Purity and Murshida out cold, none the wiser for what was happening around them, and she could even imagine Sanya trying to think of something witty to say to hide her fear. *I'm sorry, Klaud, I honestly can't imagine what you're doing right now, but I'm thinking about you too.*

"I don't want these people to die, *Whirlwind*," Esera said out loud, making sure the laser wasn't transmitting her signal. "But how can I get them out of this?"

On the control panel, a single key on the keyboard lit up: an arrow character pointing towards the bow.

"Forward it is," said Esera.

When the two ships arrived at Phindar, they found the orbitals deserted of any warships. Six months ago, there'd been two *Venators* here. Where had they gone? Esera had the feeling she'd find out soon, and she wouldn't like the answer when it came.

Despite having been told to return to her cabin, Sanya was out and about on damage control. The strains of hyperspace were pushing the severely-damaged *Encounter* to her very limit.

"Just hold that pipe there," Zule told her, face hidden behind a safety mask. Sanya had one of her own on.

"Okay," Sanya said.

Zule turned on the fusion welder, and its light as bright as a miniature sun hurt Sanya's eyes even behind the tinted visor. As quickly as it came, it was gone.

"There we go." Zule flipped her mask up, and took a deep breath. She punched the wall intercom unit. "Xiss here. You can open the valves on deck four section ten, we're good."

"*Thank you, ensign,*" said Voyan over the intercom. The pipe rattled and popped, but the weld held.

"It's a patch job, but it's working," Zule told him. "We should be fine for a few days."

"*A few days are all we need,*" said Voyan. "*Link up with Oto and Durm, one of the tensor field generators is screaming alerts to the computer. If that goes, the whole ship goes.*" By the tone of his voice, Voyan might have been telling them that stocks for a minor dental hygiene paste company had fallen by two percent.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Sanya said. "That's just wonderful! Miha Voyan, I want a new ship!"

"*Fix that generator and you might just live long enough for that to happen,*" said Voyan.

Sanya tried to growl, but the sound that escaped her mouth was a pitiful whine.

Zule took her by the arm. "Let's go, short stuff! We've got a ship to save!"

The constant hyperspace jumps were taking a toll on *Encounter,* by Voyan's report. They didn't just need a safe star system, they needed a proper dock. Botajef had docks before the system became a battlefield. New Bornalex had nothing left in its orbitals. "Change of plan, we're heading for Botajef," Esera said over the laser-linked comms line.

"*Acknowledged, Captain,*" said Voyan.

It was a desperate gamble. The situation at Botajef changed by the week; there was so much debris in the planet's orbit that it was unclear if any of the dockyards remained intact. Ground forces of both sides had pulled out months ago, leaving its civilization in rubble and billions living like primitives, cut off from power, communications, and even running water in many areas. Much like Agamar, Botajef was a planet ruined for generations to come by this war. Esera found it incredible, in a sick way, that tens of millions of soldiers on both sides could have fought here and never made the front page of Galactic news. For the ten billion people of Botajef, their world had ended. For policy-makers on Coruscant and Raxus, Botajef was a sentence in a memorandum, if even that.

Whirlwind was first out of hyperspace, *Encounter* followed moments later. "What do you see, *Whirlwind*?" Esera asked.

The scanners beeped a staccato tune, trying to identify every object ahead. Botajef itself had a visible ring of destroyed ships and stations around it; the surface bore strange linear scars stretching for hundreds of kilometers. *Where the orbital elevator tethers crashed down,* Esera realized. Millions of tons worth of cables had hit the surface at thirty kilometers or more a second. Botajef's atmosphere was filled with dust; temperatures had dropped far below normal. She wondered just how many of those ten billion people alleged to be down there were already dead, and how many would die in the years to come from the unnatural winter and famine. The number of dead and soon-to-be-dead was so big that it was simply unimaginable and meaningless, to Esera's shame.

Local space was just as messy. Hulks and derelicts circled the star haphazardly, flaring with radiation and other exotic particles as unspent hypermatter fuel was heated by the sun. The scanners had trouble telling actual ships apart from debris. *Anything could be out there…*

"Okay, we've got a few minutes before that *Tector* arrives here," Esera said to *Encounter*'s bridge. "This system is screwed, get the ship turned around towards Celanon-"

Whirlwind screamed an alarm.

"Contact! Two star destroyers in the debris field!" Esera cried.

"*We're spooling up the hyperdrive,*" said Voyan.

Tens of thousands of kilometers away, two *Venators* were firing up their engines, now glowing bright among the wrecked ships. Optical sensors locked onto them, the computer spat out a report: the markings on those star destroyers matched the ones known to be stationed at Phindar. "They were waiting for us," Esera said.

The first salvo of turbolaser fire came in, eye-searing blue beams blazing past *Whirlwind* and slamming into *Encounter.*

"*Shields intact, Captain,*" Voyan said, even as another salvo was on the way. "*Divert power to the shields to keep them up while we plot a course. Ensign Meo, be quick about it!*"

"*Commander,*" said a droid, "*there's a problem in the primary power conduit!*"

Lieutenant-Commander Durm's gruff voice joined the line next: "*Commander, the conduit from the reactor to the hyperdrive just blew! We're dumping gamma radiation everywhere!*"

Esera felt like she'd just been punched in the stomach. She knew enough about hyperdrives to realize what that meant. *Encounter* wasn't going anywhere.

Whirlwind's scanners screamed again. "The *Tector* just arrived," Esera told Voyan. There was a pause on his end before he spoke again, with a finality that ripped open the wound inside her that never healed:

"*We can't hold off three star destroyers.*"

Another salvo came in, and while the ship withstood it, her line to *Encounter* was gone. Nothing came over the laser comms but static now.

Esera's mouth was dry, her heart slammed against her chest, her brow was damp with cold sweat, her whole body shook. She'd watched her master die, from mistakes *she* made, not him, and she'd been too powerless to stop it. Now she was going to watch her crew die. It was going to happen all over again. *No, no, no, it won't end like this! I won't let it!*

"What can I do?" she whispered.

Whirlwind pushed her engines to full power. *Take me,* she seemed to say. *Fly with me. Meet them head-on. Do not go quietly!*

Esera took the control stick, and let the Force guide her. The *Venators* were launching their attack wings, squadrons of fighters and bombers shooting out towards *Encounter*. *These are older ships,* thought Esera, eyeing the scanner's data. Their entire dorsal spines opened up to launch their fighters; those long doors were slow to move and the hangar decks weren't armored. She punched the throttle.

Cloak up and engines burning, Esera and *Whirlwind* closed distance to the *Venator* before its hangar doors were halfway sealed. She dropped the stealth field only when the star destroyer filled the whole viewport. With six laser cannons to her, *Whirlwind* unleashed a hail of laser fire into the hangar deck. Fuel tanks, munitions magazines, equipment, they all went up in flames even as the doors rolled shut. That would slow them down… after their attack wings ran dry on ammunition. *Whirlwind* spun about, back to *Encounter,* cloaked once more.

"Come on, come on!" She urged her ship forward. *Encounter* was returning sporadic and inaccurate fire on her attackers, aiming by eyesight alone most likely. But her shields glowed blue under the assault she was taking. Her resistance wouldn't last more than a minute or two.

Esera decloaked behind the first bomber formation she came up on, and lit them up without mercy. The NTB-630s returned fire from their rear turrets, but against a Force-sensitive pilot and her Force-sensitive ship that could disappear on a whim, they had little chance.

"That's right, defend your brothers," Esera said, when she saw a V-wing squadron breaking off their attack run and coming her way. "Come to me!"

Whirlwind might have torn up the bombers with a surprise attack from behind, but she was much too big to seriously dogfight. Her tactics became hit and run, cloak and de-cloak, blast whatever she could in the few seconds she had. Heat warnings sounded in the cabin, *Whirlwind*'s cloak wasn't meant to be flipped off and on like this. But at last, a minute and a half that felt like ten hours, the inevitable happened.

Encounter's shields failed.

Within seconds, her thin armor began to glow and warp as the star destroyers pumped turbolasers into it, and sections of the main hull crumpled and exploded. She only had moments left, now.

"No!" Esera screamed. "I'll take you with me, Potkin!"

Whirlwind rocketed straight towards the *Tector*'s bridge tower, cloak dropped and lasers set to fire until their capacitors burnt out. But her ship slammed to a halt, and only her safety harness stopped her from flying into the console.

In her desperate fury, Esera had forgotten that tractor beams existed.

"Got you!" said Potkin, allowing herself to smirk. "We'll deal with *Scimitar* when this is over."

"We're getting a transmission from the rebel destroyer," the comms officer said.

"Put it through," said Captain Danigan.

The static-laced hologram of a less-than-impressive man appeared, haggard but resolved.

"You have General Potkin," she told him.

"*I am announcing the unconditional surrender of this vessel,*" he said. The words pained him, his face was strained and his fists clenched. "*We have no means by which to continue the fight. Further resistance will only see my crew dead without purpose.*"

"I don't know who you are, and I don't care," Potkin said to the rebel man. "You've led us on a chase across three sectors. You've ruined my mission to secure the beskar mines of Mandalore. And I've already got what I wanted from your pitiful little garbage scow. Your Captain Komara and her cloaking ship are trapped in my tractor beam. You have nothing to offer me now, so your offer to surrender will not-"

The Separatist looked off to the side, and drew his hand across his throat. The transmission went out.

He cut me off! That scrawny little rebel had cut her off! *Unforgivable!*

"Captain, they're turning straight towards us!" an officer said.

"He's going for the ram," said Danigan. "I guess he's got more backbone than I thought. Do you think it runs in Komara's chain of command?"

Potkin rolled her eyes, doing her best not to let her genuine anger show. *Daring*'s main battery took aim. "Let's end this farce. Gunnery crews, fire at-"

Daring rocked with such force that Potkin and Danigan were both thrown to the deck.

Red turbolaser beams fell like hammers on the enemy *Tector*, one after another, plunging in from above the local ecliptic in salvoes of three. *Oceana* dived down on the star destroyer like the chariot of the gods, her triple turbolaser battery's fire like their thunderbolts.

"Harsol, focus your guns on the *Tector*!" Grievous ordered, from the bridge of *Invisible Hand*. "Have your fighters follow mine in against the *Venators*!"

"*Yes, General!*" Captain Rel Harsol said.

There you are, Komara, Grievous thought. The girl's destroyer was quite literally melting under Loyalist fire, and that strange stealth ship of hers was caught in a tractor beam by the *Tector*.

"The clone fighters are in a terrible formation," Captain Dofine said. "They're all over the place. This will be over fast."

"Good." Grievous paced about the bridge. He'd known something had gone wrong at Mandalore when Komara failed to report in on time. He'd known something had gone *really* wrong when his scouts had found a Republic occupation fleet in the middle of landing on Mandalore. At least the beskar mines had been turned into a lake of lava, so Komara had completed her primary objective in a way that made him proud. After that, it'd been a question of figuring out where she'd gone, and when they'd failed to do that, it'd been a question of figuring out where she'd turn up again. Botajef had been Grievous's guess, and he'd proven correct.

This could have gone better, but it could have gone worse, he thought. *Oceana*'s navigation suite had bugged out and cost them nearly two hours. Now *Encounter* had maybe a minute left, and that was being generous. At least until he'd presented the star destroyers with more threatening targets than a crippled *Recusant*.

Vulture droids and Hyena bombers rushed the *Venators,* drawing the Loyalist fighters along with them. Tri-fighters swooped in behind, darting in and out of friend and foe's formation alike, shredding the confused clone fighters and bombers.

Oceana had given the *Tector* a pummeling; the star destroyer was coming about to bring its main battery fully on the cruiser. Rel Harsol didn't flinch; he kept his ship's prow pointed straight at the enemy. *Invisible Hand* trailed behind, moving more slowly. Grievous wanted to see how *Oceana* fared in a duel with a *Tector,* and he didn't want to waste fuel on an expensive braking maneuver when *Encounter* needed evacuating. If anyone was still alive on the dying hulk, which was venting all manner of substances. Preliminary analysis indicated almost all the hypermatter fuel was gone, the likely cause of the ship's refusal to catastrophically explode.

The two giants battled it out, slamming each other's shields with red and green lasers. One of the *Venator*swas already showing signs of trouble, before any ordinance had even reached it. Komara had at least put up a fight here. The other was about to be swarmed by Separatist attackers.

"Magnificent," Dofine said, watching a hologram display of the *Tector* and *Oceana* going at it. Just as the engineers had promised, *Oceana* had a clear edge on the *Tector* when it came to maneuvers. Harsol was consistently getting more of his guns on target in their plodding dance of capital ships. It helped that so much of *Oceana*'s firepower was tied up in her triple prow battery.

"Bring us up alongside *Encounter*, Dofine," Grievous said.

"Right away, General. Shall I dispatch a salvage team?"

No would have been his gut answer. But Grievous paused. Komara had an appreciation for that ship. "Yes," said Grievous. "We'll take it under tow and see what can be saved at Celanon. Harsol, acknowledge."

"*Acknowledging, General.*"

"We are getting *Encounter* out of here. Keep that *Tector* tied up until we've recovered our fighter wings, then retreat to Celanon. Make sure that small ship is broken free from that tractor beam."

"*Received and understood,*" Harsol said.

As far as Grievous was concerned, this had been a successful test. *Oceana* would be returning to a friendly port without major damage. And more importantly, Grievous had saved his best agent from certain demise. He had more than a few questions for her.

"Well, look who showed up," Potkin said, once *Daring*'s computer had identified which specific *Providence*-class carrier-cruiser had arrived. "The big clanker himself!"

"I'd love to get a shot at him, General, but our hands are tied," said Captain Danigan.

"Do we know what that thing is?" asked Potkin. *Daring* shuddered as another salvo slammed against the shields, which were down to forty percent on the dorsal side.

"The new rebel cruiser, I think." Danigan was clinging to an officer's control console, the officer had been thrown off his chair.

"Yes, sir," said the officer on the deck, crawling back into his seat. "Intel's calling it the *M*-class, for Minntooine. This is the first time we've seen it outside of that system."

"It's bloody fast!" Danigan glared off in the direction of their attacker.

"Hold it as long as possible," Potkin told them. "Focus all scanners and sensors on that thing! I want every second of it recorded!"

Komara looked like she'd slip away again, but Potkin was going to deliver something even more valuable than her to the Chancellor.

Obi-wan Kenobi sat on the sill of one of the Temple's vast windows. Week by week, more adults disappeared from its halls. Some were joining Tarkin's Knights. Most were being deployed to the Republic's Outer Rim forward bases, replacing more capable veterans who'd died in the course of the war. Having so many Jedi away from the Temple was dangerous.

And he *knew* the danger was real, more real than any of them had imagined. That *thing* had proved so. And everyone had felt it.

"Going to join us, are you, young Kenobi?" asked Master Yoda, floating along in his hovering chair. Master Windu walked with him.

"Yes, yes, of course," Obi-wan said. "I was just reflecting. When the *thing* passed by, did you… did you have a moment of clarity? A revelation? If only briefly?"

"No," said Windu, giving him a curious look. "I just felt more darkness."

"Hmm…" Yoda pondered, as the three made their way to the turbolift. He said nothing more until they were in the Council chamber.

Every Jedi master at the Temple was on edge: Yoda, Mace Windu, Shaak Ti, Kit Fitso, Agen Kolar, and Obi-wan Kenobi. The others, all deployed abroad, listened to their tale of the dark *thing* that had passed overhead, in tandem with Chancellor Tarkin's shuttle, returning from an unknown location after several days of unexplained absence.

"There can be no doubt now," Ki-Adi-Mundi said. "Tarkin is in league with Sidious. They are all but openly collaborating."

"I don't think that ever *was* in doubt," said Plo Koon.

Stass Allie scowled. "And are we going to do anything about it? The Supreme Chancellor is a pawn of the Sith. It is certain now! Can we sit by and do nothing?"

"And what exactly are we going to do?" asked Agen Kolar.

"Walk into the Senate building and arrest the Chancellor." Kit Fitso said, with his usual satisfied smirk. "What other choice can there be?"

"Remove the Chancellor from office, purge the Sith infiltration," said Ki-Adi-Mundi. Several other masters nodded in agreement.

"What you're suggesting is high treason," said Mace Windu.

"Only if we lose," Kit Fitso said. "And if we do nothing, we'll lose anyway."

Stass Allie put a fist in her palm. "The constitution is in shreds, the courts are compromised, the Senate is toothless because of these new sector moffs." On that last note, Obi-wan wasn't so sure. The Senate certainly didn't think it was toothless, they were giving Tarkin a constant stream of trouble. "Even if the Chancellor isn't a Sith puppet, we *need* to do something. Tarkin is a dictator in all but name now. The Jedi will need to take control of the government to oversee the transition of power."

"Quiet once more, our youngest has been," Yoda said, his aged voice cutting through the debate instantly. Shaak Ti looked up.

"For a moment, as the… presence passed over us, the Force seemed to clear. Just for a moment. It came and went so quickly that I'm not even sure it happened," she said. "I've been thinking about that."

"It *did* happen, because I experienced the same thing," said Obi-wan.

"And what, exactly, did this clarity reveal to you?" asked Mace Windu.

"We're in danger," said Shaak Ti.

"Grave danger," Obi-wan added.

"That's obvious!" Ki-Adi-Mundi scoffed.

"No, master," said Obi-wan. "I mean imminent danger. Danger that could strike the whole Order any second. One wrong move and…" He sighed, and sank back into his chair. Shaak Ti took the initiative.

"Whatever we do, we must move with the utmost caution. I would like to remind this council of my earlier proposal. We would be far safer if we moved off of Coruscant to someplace remote. And even safer if we withdrew from the war."

"Not an option," Agen Kolar said. "We have the nexu by the tail, we can't let go. Or the schismatics can run free."

"This schism would never have happened if we'd stuck with our principles and didn't get involved," said Shaak Ti.

"Enough of this," Mace Windu snapped. "We must keep our minds in the present. And in the present, we have a Supreme Chancellor setting himself up as a dictator associating with agents of the Sith, and now associating with dark side presences so strong every master in this temple felt something unspeakably evil pass near us. We can't pretend something isn't wrong at the highest level of government any longer. I say the time has come to act."

Windu raised his hand, initiating the vote. Over the next minute, all other hands went up, but for Shaak Ti and Obi-wan… and Yoda.

"To a dark place this will lead us," Yoda said, sounding for all the world like a mere tired old man, and not the most powerful Jedi alive.

"If we're going to do this, can we at least gather proof of wrongdoing first?" Obi-wan asked.

"Of course," Windu said. "We *will* find it. It's no coincidence Maul 'escaped' weeks before Tarkin brought something that evil to this planet. And once we have proof…"

"We take him down. For the good of the Republic," Kit Fitso finished for him.

Yoda slowly raised a hand, and Obi-wan followed, despite his gut instinct screaming at him that this was a bad idea. Shaak Ti was the lone dissenting vote.

She looked out over the planet-wide city, towards the Senate dome, and spoke in a quiet voice: "The die is cast."

Author's notes: Everything up to Esera's arrival on *Encounter* is cut content from chapter 50, and there's 10,000 more words of chapter 51 I've cut and moved to chapter 52. No recriminations in this one, unlike my prediction last chapter. I really don't know how to be brief, do I? To answer Valued Reviewer imveryhungry's question of if I'm alright, no I'm not alright, someone please help me, my two boomer author idols are masters of conservation of detail but I just can't get it right and I'm tearing out my hair here. Maybe I'm fated to be long-winded and overly-detailed.

I'm glad the sequence on planet MR-68173B with Tarkin and the boys was popular. You guys seem to like spooky planets just as much as I do. Stay tuned, because I'm just warming up my spooky planet muscles… You're gonna love it. Maybe.

So, good news, chapter 52 will be out in late May or early June, it's almost done. Once I finish it in a few days, it's just a matter of how long my patience lasts until I send it off to my beta reader, Corshy1, to review it. Shout-out to him as always. See you guys next time!

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